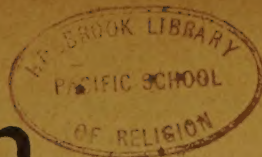


The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM



No. 143

JULY 22ND, 1942

DEAR MEMBER,

The publication of Professor Mannheim's letter in C.N-L. No. 135 brought me a letter from one of our readers in an influential position at the centre of public affairs, enclosing a statement which quite independently he had recently written on the same subject.

THE POLITICAL TASK

The agreement between the two contributions in the understanding of the situation and of what it demands is striking. The one is the result of many years of scholarly study of the forces that are shaping modern society, the other springs out of a long experience and intimate knowledge of politics. Both agree that the great danger is the establishment of some form of dictatorship; that the only means of averting the danger is national agreement about the principles on which our society is to be based in the future; and that, since democracy rests on democratic consent, the agreed social objectives must be such as to commend themselves to the sense of fairness and justice of the great majority of the nation. There are strong internal oppositions among us at present held in check by the war. If these become accentuated and the conflict becomes acute at the end of the war, one side or the other may be tempted to seek a solution by violence.

It is common ground that there must be more than one party in a democratic state; free discussion is essential for the preservation of democratic liberties. But it is to bury our head in the sands not to recognise that freedom of discussion and the rivalry of parties are possible only on the basis of a fundamental agreement which neither party attempts to destroy. The common convictions which bind society together cannot be changed from election to election, but have to be settled once for all, either by consent or by civil war. It is this spontaneous consent that has been the foundation of British liberties in the past; and it is just this basis of consent that is threatened, and has to some extent been undermined, by the new forces let loose in society. The shaken foundations have to be laid anew after the war, and this cannot be the work of a single party but only a fundamental decision of the nation as a whole.

Whether in order to achieve this national decision it is necessary that there should continue to be a national government during the critical period of transition from a war economy to a society planned for freedom is a question of rational judgment based on facts, in regard to which Christians may reach different conclusions. Most of us will no doubt want to reserve a final decision until the alignment of parties and persons has become more clearly defined. But what we cannot afford to be in two minds about is that in the preservation of a free society vital Christian interests are at stake; that to achieve a free and just society is a task as great and difficult as to win the war; and that, however much we may desire the end, we may lose it altogether if we fail to choose the right means. While we go on debating this or that among a hundred issues important enough in themselves, and switch our discussions from one interesting topic to another, the floods may break and sweep all our little debates out of existence. We may have

in the near future either consciously to make a creative national choice or to leave events to make the decision for us. If events decide, it will be the wrong decision. The importance of Professor Mannheim's contribution and of the statement that follows is that they force to the front this supreme issue. Here is the statement :

" Ever since the war started there has been a tendency in even the most surprising quarters to recognise the revolutionary nature of the war. This movement of opinion has opened a great many minds to possibilities and probabilities that before were to them unthinkable. There is a flexibility of outlook in many quarters which may be a dangerous flexibility—like that of a highly flexible but wholly unanchored spring. It is vague and indefinite, and lacks any body of political knowledge or theory upon which to base itself.

" During the war we are committed to a government of domestic compromise and to a House of Commons which makes great legislative changes impossible—even if there were the time and opportunity to make them. Administration and administrative regulation have practically supplanted legislation, and it is to-day in the subtle and often unobserved movement of the administrative measures that we must detect the advance.

" But great though the immediate problem may be, it is as nothing compared to what will face us when the war is over. The circumstances with which we shall then have to cope will be a hundred times more difficult. The economic and social conditions of Europe will be in chaos and turmoil. The controlling factors will be food supplies and raw materials and shipping, which will be at the disposal of the victorious powers. It may be necessary to continue rationing of all kinds. War industries will suddenly cease and the entire world will want to change over to peace manufactures. Material and moral devastation and the resultant bitterness and hatred will rule all over the continents of Europe and Asia. Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary action will be incipient upon all sides, and the three stabilising factors will be Great Britain, U.S.A. and U.S.S.R.—not in itself an easy team to go in harness together.

" Somehow some party, group, or combination of people have got to cope with that situation, have got to have plans ready, and have got to persuade the people to apply them if we are to avoid chaos and revolution ourselves. In these circumstances the key to the possibility of a real reconstruction of Europe and of our own country will lie very largely in the hands of the British Government, however it is constituted. The strength and the outlook of our Government will be the vital factor for success or failure.

" How then are we to act ? What, if any, general principle can we apply to the period of reconstruction which we can get the people as a whole to support ?

" If we return at once to party politics, and there should result anything like an equal division of forces, we shall have a stalemate which will be disastrous to that quick action which will be essential. We shall have lost the natural cementing effect of a common defence of our country, and the driving power of the fear of defeat which makes people afraid of stressing their personal or class interests.

" There will be in some very powerful and influential quarters a return to that selfish competition of vested interests which has been so disastrous in the past. In these circumstances it will be essential to try and rally every kind and description of progressive support for some broad line of policy which the people can understand, simple enough to " put across " in a post-war election, and which we can even now start popularising upon a non-party basis.

" I see no reason why we should not appeal to the people for a national progressive government to win the peace, as we have appealed for a national government to win the war. I do not believe the people are so interested in party loyalties to-day as they are in the idea of accomplishing some change after the war. They do not want to repeat the disillusionment after the last war. That is why to-day they want to see things happening, and not merely to hear promises of what may happen. But let us nevertheless face up to the perfectly clear fact that immediately the present danger of war passes there will be a strong tendency for the old class war to break out with renewed force, and that in the struggle against reaction we shall require all the forces we can persuade or command to our side.

" What should be the policy of such a national progressive government ? It would not be possible to adopt for an all-inclusive progressive government any existing " ism," nor would it be wise to invent a whole new programme of measures on a compromise basis. Such a programme would not convey to the electors as a whole the urgency or the significance of the crisis of peace, nor would it imbue them with the inspiration necessary to carry them through their difficulties.

"I would set out first the objectives, the things we want to attain either positively or negatively or both, such as no unemployment but employment for all men and women at a fair and equal wage—a half dozen of them perhaps, things that almost anyone but the most hard-baked reactionary would agree to as objectives of our post-war civilization. Then I would stress that we want to avoid the necessity for any form of dictatorship, and that to do so we must have an efficient democracy which preserves the maximum possible liberty for the individual. And finally we should have to deal with the means to be adopted to reach these objectives through democracy. This, of course, is far the most difficult part of the programme from the propaganda point of view.

"Elected supporters of such a national progressive government should be asked to pledge themselves to use any and every means that was decided by the government to be necessary to attain those ends, irrespective of any individual class or vested interests that might stand in the way. It should have from the people a mandate giving it as great power to over-ride everything that stood in the way as they had been prepared to give to win the war. The same power to control and requisition, the same power to order, regulate and take over finance or land or industry, to be used for the purpose of reaching the peace objectives set out.

"That is an idea that can be grasped easily—it is a method of advance that is empirical and not based on any set theory, and would give the government just the sort of power that was required. Moreover the people, fresh from the recent experiences of war, would understand what was meant. Unless democracy can be persuaded to give some such mandate, I doubt whether democracy can survive the storms of the post-war period."

THIS ENGLAND

Every one who has a sensitive eye and ear for what is happening around us finds endless evidence of the amazing ability of our people to "take it," of initiative, resourcefulness, helpfulness to neighbours, devotion to duty, uncomplaining endurance, cheerfulness under strain and other virtues that make us wonder whether there ever was a people like ours. He also comes across, or hears reports of, instances of incompetence, irresponsibility, utter lack of imagination, trifling and sheer selfishness that tempt him to doubt whether we deserve to win the war, or can make anything of the future if we do win it. Illustrations of the first side of the picture are so numerous that there seems to be no particular reason for recording one rather than another. And yet it is necessary that we should be reminded from time to time of the constructive contribution that is being made continuously up and down the country to the building of the England of to-morrow by the grit, initiative and resourcefulness of individuals. The following instance has been brought to my attention by one of our members who recently visited the school in question:

"Two girls' secondary schools have been evacuated to this small town. They share a not too commodious private house and have part use of some of the grammar school buildings. Most of the girls were happy in their billets, but there were a few complete misfits and a number of minor difficulties. Two of the staff put their heads together and decided that a school hostel was the obvious solution, if only a house could be found. A sizeable country house fell vacant at the right moment; the owner, who was keenly interested in the idea, let the house furnished, and the Education Committee agreed to sign the lease. The two members of staff financed the whole scheme out of the billeting allowances, including a salaried cook and the upkeep of a large garden. Twenty girls live in this house. They are immensely proud of it; bedrooms compete in tidiness and gaiety, washing-up squads have the tables cleared and the dishes clean in miraculously short time; pocket money has been contributed to a common-room fiction library. There is an air of spaciousness and culture about the house, and the atmosphere is that of a family and not of a barracks. Improvements in health, spirits and quality of work have been most marked."

LAYING FOUNDATIONS OVERSEAS

As I am quoting particular instances, I may add another from a letter from a young missionary in India. What he describes is the kind of work that is being done to-day by hundreds of missionaries in India and Africa, and was being done in the vast areas now under Japanese occupation, where it has for the time being been brought to an

end or severely limited. His own work lies partly in the Indian villages and partly in a town of considerable size which is one of the main centres of Hinduism.

"There has recently been notable progress in a number of villages. To develop the leadership of the ordinary Christian villager two rural summer schools have been held, dealing with Christian faith and worship, problems of Christian living, hygiene, diet, sanitation, poultry keeping and similar activities. The attempt to improve poultry has proved a disappointing business. An expensive pair of birds was purchased and presented to the village teacher, under an arrangement by which he was to sell half the eggs and chickens to the villagers and contribute the proceeds to the Church. The birds were solemnly dedicated to their exalted purpose at the morning service in the Church, and the cock celebrated the occasion by crowing through the Psalms. Both birds, however, suffered an early demise, while the unhallowed and unimproved country birds continue to flourish."

In the city the main problem is the tough conservatism of the caste Hindus. A small study-circle composed of Hindus and Christians has been started. It meets in one of the Hindu monasteries and is led jointly by the head of the institution and the writer of the letter. The subject of study is alternately St. John's Gospel and one of the Upanishads, and the discussions have been keen.

One of the most exacting tasks is evangelistic work undertaken during one of the great festivals which attract hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all over India.

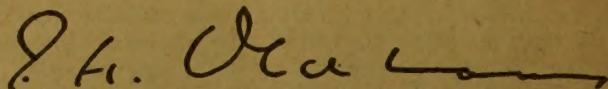
"I have found the work both fascinating and exhausting. The seething crowds, the dust, the heat, the intense excitement with which the crowds respond to the glamour and pageantry of the festival, of light and music, of the rhythmic drone of prayers intoned by processions of Brahmins, and of the idols proudly carried on the shoulders of hundreds of sweating men—all this as a background to long and close arguments and sharp encounters with questioners generally hostile, often very able, and always backed by a crowd ready at any moment to flare up in resentment and anger when it seems that the ancient faith is being attacked. Such experiences test as with fire those views which first took intellectual shape in friendly battles round college coffee cups, test and also sharpen one's missionary convictions. The way lies along a knife's edge: on the one hand the kind of words that lay one open justly to the charge of embittering India's already bitter inter-religious tensions; on the other the kind of words that will allow the crowd to disperse happily re-assured that no fundamental conversion is necessary, peace restored and the cause decisively betrayed."

BRIGHTER PROSPECTS FOR THE CHURCHES

The News-Letter has little room for the lighter side of things. I must, however, pass on this extract from a provincial newspaper sent by one of our members.

"How will the churches face up to the great responsibility that is theirs at this time? The fact that a man of the eminence of Professor Joad sees the need of their help and work, and publicly proclaims it, should spur them to greater effort—and to success."

Yours sincerely,



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